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Asian Americans and Public Health

Key words: longest life expectancy, cancer, mental health and traditional medicine

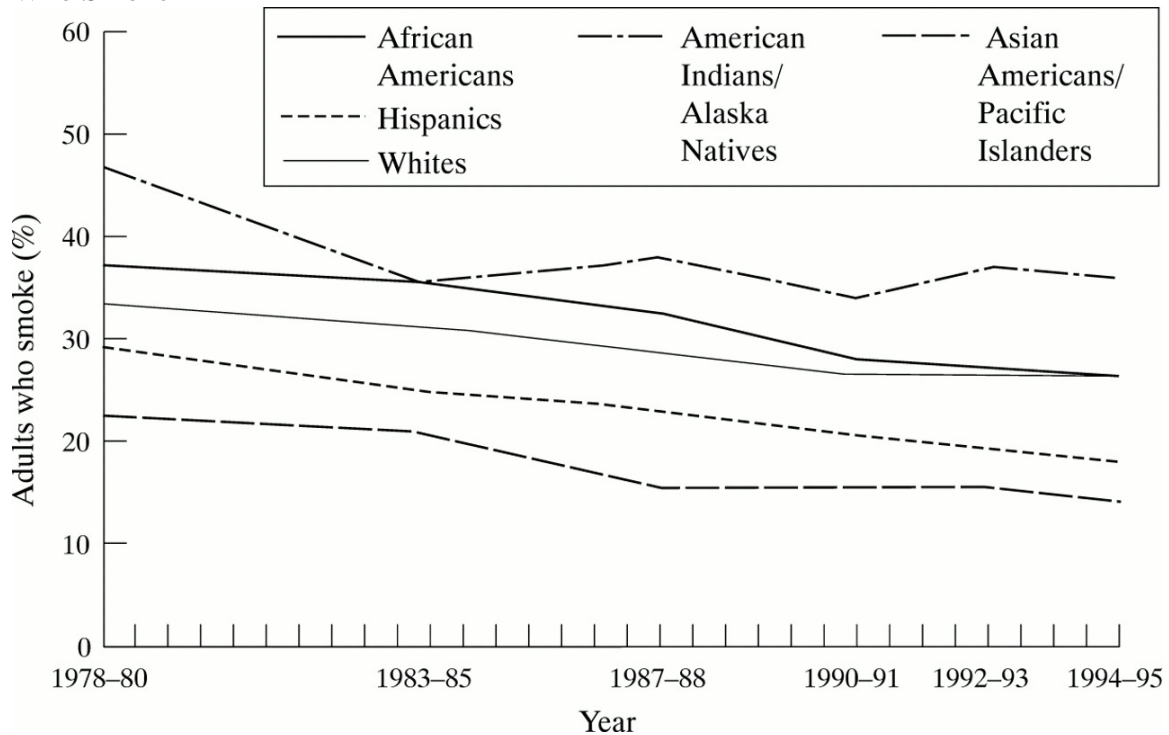
Description: Asian Americans have been referred to as the “model minority” for their quality of education and economic success, but little known is the fact that they also stand out in terms of public health. Asian Americans have the longest life expectancy rate of any group, as well as the lowest infant mortality rate, the lowest alcohol abuse and smoking rates, and they have made their traditional medicines increasingly popular with the larger United States population.

Key points:

- Asian Americans have the longest life expectancy of any racial group in the United States
- Asian Americans have the lowest infant mortality rate.
- Asian Americans have higher rates of liver cancer due to higher rates of Hepatitis B
- Asian Americans have a lower rate of alcohol abuse and smoke less than other groups
- Asian Americans as a group tend to shy away from mental health services
- Traditional Asian medicines have become increasingly popular in the United States (including acupuncture, herbal remedies and massage)


Images:

<http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/7/2/198/F4.large.jpg> - Graph of American Adults Who Smoke



<http://www.cdc.gov/widgets/datastats/alt/index.html> - 2007 National Diabetes Fact Sheet Data (from the CDC)

People with Diabetes by Race and Ethnicity, 2004-2006*

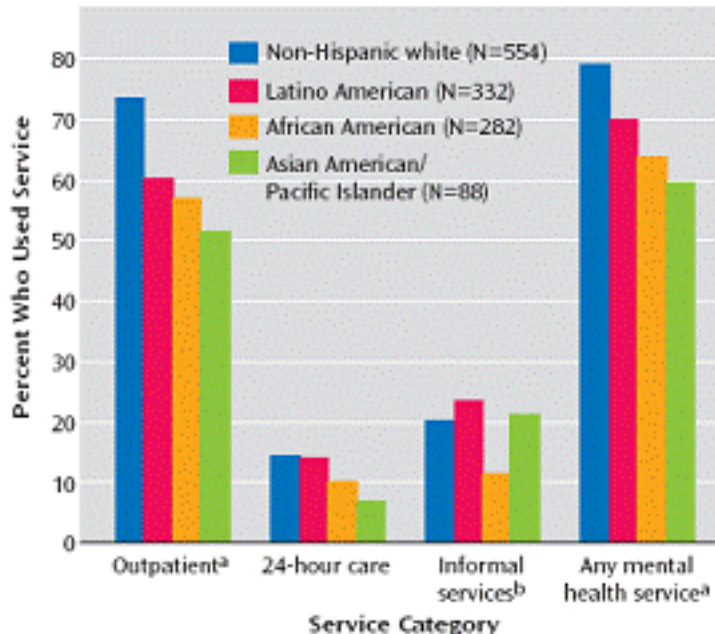


Non-Hispanic whites	6.6%
Asian Americans	7.5%
Hispanics	10.4%
Non-Hispanic blacks	11.8%
[^] AIAN	16.5%

*Adjusted by age
[^]American Indians and Alaska Natives

<http://www.sph.umich.edu/apihealth/Mental%20health%20utilization.html> - Graph of American Mental Health Utilization by Race

FIGURE 1. Mental Health Service Use Among Youths Age 6–18 Years in a Large, Publicly Funded System of Care by Racial/Ethnic Group (N=1,256)



^a Significant difference among racial/ethnic groups ($p < 0.001$, chi-square test).

^b Significant difference among racial/ethnic groups ($p < 0.02$, chi-square test).

Brief:

Asian Americans are a difficult group to discuss because they are not a cohesive whole – Japanese Americans differ very much from Vietnamese Americans, from Indian Americans, etc. So while some research shows that Asian Americans are strong in one department, (such as higher education), it may only pertain certain groups of Asian Americans. There are six major subgroups of Asian Americans: Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Indian, Korean and Vietnamese. Concerning public health, it is incredibly difficult to say one issue pertains (or does not) to the group as a whole. However, numerous studies have been done on individual groups of Asian Americans, and that information has in turn been gathered and correlated and applied to the entire group.

Some interesting findings are that Asian Americans have the longest life expectancy of any racial group within the country. Additionally, they have the lowest infant-mortality rate and the lowest age-adjusted mortality rate. They share the same three leading causes of death as all other groups: heart disease, cancer and stroke; however they differ in ways like which cancers they are more susceptible to. For example, Asian Americans are more likely to develop liver cancer than other groups; this has been attributed to the high rate of Hepatitis B within the group. Chinese men have been found to have higher rates of nasopharynx cancer, and Vietnamese women have been found to have dramatically higher rates of cervical cancer. The group as a whole is

also found to have a higher rate of Tuberculosis. Some Asian Americans are at a higher risk of acquiring type 2 diabetes.

An interesting find is that Asian Americans have a dramatically lower rate of alcohol abuse, (and a higher rate of abstinence from alcohol), and thus have the lowest incidence of drunk driving of any group. This group also has the lowest percentage of adult smokers, with female Asian Americans holding the smallest smoking population in the country. The reason for the low rate of female Asian American smokers is due to traditional Asian cultural norms, which frown upon women smokers. The low rate of alcohol abuse is in large part due to the fact that many Asians cannot metabolize alcohol as well as other groups, however cultural expectations play a role as well.

Newer immigrants have difficulty affording health insurance and finding doctors who are cognizant of cultural peculiarities. Even Asian Americans who have spent more time in the US have difficulties with Western medical practices; cultural values and stigmas are strong in many Asian traditions and are not understood by Western practitioners. The most noticeable instance of culture clash in medicine concerns the mental health sector. Asian traditions (namely Chinese), perceive mental health problems as shameful, and therefore do not take the time to properly study or understand them. Asian Americans seek less mental help than any other racial group, and they have been found to experience language and cultural barriers with Western doctors that combined with the culture of shame, cause them to discontinue mental treatment rather than continue seeking help.

Asian traditional medicines such as acupuncture, herbal remedies and massage have become widely popular within the United States. This has compensated for much of the lack in Western medical care.

One last interesting fact is the role of Asian Americans in public health professions. In the Asian tradition, being a medical professional is one of the most respectable jobs one can have. Due to this reverence, and a strong culture of family (and familial pressure), many Asian Americans pursue medical careers. In terms of percentage of population, more Asian Americans pursue medical professions than any other American ethnic group.

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Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, has multiple studies on Asian American Health, here is just one: <http://www.jhsph.edu/aacp/program/aibcp.html>